At the foot of the mountain

Systematic investigations of protohistoric settlement in northern Calabria

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Rural Life in Protohistoric Italy

15 years of field walking surveys conducted by the Groningen Institute of Archaeology in the Raganello basin (northern Calabria, Italy) have resulted in the recording of more than 240 surface scatters. The majority of these are small (less than 20m diameter) scatters of poorly preserved handmade pottery dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Such ephemeral sites remain underrepresented in archaeological research, although they are found in almost every Mediterranean field walking survey project.

Our current investigations in the Rural Life in Protohistoric Italy project (2010-2015) are aimed at a better understanding of rural settlement and land use in the metal ages and detection biases, and at evaluating multiple detection methods for ephemeral archaeological remains.

The project is funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and is directed by Martijn van Leusen.

Site classification and sampling approach

We base our investigations on a site classification which does not contain preconceived site types. The site classification uses both landscape zones and properties of the material assemblage to define ten site types, five of which occur in the mountainous zone. A sampling approach is used to select specific examples of these types for detailed investigations.

By extrapolating the results of on-site studies to a whole site class, we can integrate local and regional scales of research and interpretation. Some sites needed to be re-classified after further investigations, but overall the typology worked well. (De Neef, forthcoming PhD thesis)

Multidisciplinary investigations

Our methods include high-resolution re-surveys of the surface archaeology, the application of multiple archaeo-geophysical techniques, manual augering, palaeo-environmental studies, the application of targeted test pits, and studies of specific pottery types, wares and fabrics. Apart from site-oriented studies, we conduct pedological fieldwork to map soils and investigate slope processes affecting the archaeological record.

The upland valley

Parts of this landscape zone are unstable, with considerable erosion and slope movement. This affects the preservation and detection of archaeological remains, resulting in a biased site distribution map.

At a number of sites we have identified occupation layers which can be associated with surface finds, but we have not found structural remains in any of the investigated examples of the “simple upland impasto site” class. Because of the poorly preserved pottery, it remains difficult to assess the duration and function of these sites, and to what extent they are contemporaneous.

Test pits at site T73 show that this location was in use from the Bronze Age to the Roman Imperial period, indicating that some parts of the upland valley were favored for long-term occupation. This unexpected deep stratigraphy invites further geo-archaeological studies of the formation of site T73.

Early sites

The earliest sites in the limestone part of the Raganello basin are Timpa Sant’Angelo and Terra Masseta (both “rich upland sites”). Both sites were occupied from the Neolithic/Chalcolithic to the Iron Age and their locations are similar: at the foot of a south-facing limestone rock face. Our surveys have shown that the Timpa Sant’Angelo complex consists of multiple scatters, directly below the rockface and further away, suggesting a long-term extended settlement.

Since Neolithic and Early Bronze Age remains are scarce in the research area, we cannot draw conclusions on settlement patterns in these early periods. In other parts of northern Calabria, Neolithic/EBA remains are known primarily from caves and from open settlements in the coastal plain. We think the early protohistoric settlements below rockfaces may be related to nearby cave sites, but this site class has not been investigated due to logistical limitations.

Rich upland sites

The site Mandroni di Maddalena, another “rich upland site”, is located at the foot of a debris cone below a limestone rock face. The variation of wares in the finds assemblage (the “richness”) can in part be explained by its long occupation from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age. The local microclimate, a few degrees warmer than nearby upland valleys, makes this location suitable for year-round use.

Prospection on debris cones such as these is challenging: magnetic gradiometry at Mandroni yielded anomalies which we initially interpreted as fills in the limestone debris. Surprisingly, a test pit yielded a stratigraphy of almost 2m with three distinct MBA occupation layers, including a potsherd pavement. Bone material included a large component of cervus elaphus (red deer), indicating that hunting was an important subsistence factor, besides ovis caprina and pig herding.